

Dialogue

An Interview with Alan Duff

VILSONI HERENIKO

Renée Heyum, Pacific Librarian and Bibliographer sans Pareil

KAREN M. PEACOCK

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Alan Duff's novel Once Were Warriors is the first work of fiction to be published in the Talanoa: Contemporary Pacific Literature series of the University of Hawai'i Press. One reason for choosing this novel was that it had recently been published in Aotearoa/New Zealand (1990) and was causing considerable controversy. All of a sudden, this relatively unknown Maori was making headlines in the print media, being interviewed over and over again on television, and making a lot of people angry. His novel had shot to the top of the bestsellers' list soon after its release, and booksellers were besieged with requests to buy it—a novel that supposedly puts the boot in the face of the Maori.

Once Were Warriors is now a successful, award-winning feature film. Alan Duff, who has since published another novel titled One Night Out Stealing (1992), a nonfiction book titled Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge (1993), and a radio series, State Ward (1994), is now famous, if not a household name in Aotearoa/New Zealand. By his account, more novels, and possibly films, are already being written or planned. Refusing to be silenced by his critics, this author will probably continue to be in the news for many years to come.

The mention of Duff's name is enough to set many people off, Maori and non-Maori alike. In a recent issue of this journal, Christina Thompson wrote a lengthy article that used as a hook the selection by the University of Hawai'i Press of Alan Duff as a "representative Maori writer." Labeling the choice "radical," she teased out the cultural and political issues that surround his book—which is "problematic from almost any perspective" (THE CONTEMPORARY PACIFIC 6:397-413). The interview that follows allows the author to talk about his work from his own perspective, and to continue the debate that still rages around it.

Soon after his film was released, Duff passed through Hawai'i on his way to Budapest to promote it. The University of Hawai'i Press took the opportunity to ask him to talk about his work during the launching of

the Talanoa series, and Vilsoni Hereniko interviewed him in his office on 16 June 1994. Hereniko describes the interview.

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Duff arrived wearing a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of blue jeans. His wife (a Pakeha nurse) accompanied him but left for the library after we had exchanged pleasantries. Duff entered my office where two videographers (a woman and a man) had already set up their equipment and were waiting to shoot our interview. The exchange took place under glaring lights, with little elbow room. Duff looked uncomfortable, perhaps partly because of the lights but also because of the academic setting.

As Duff and I had never met before, we spent the first few minutes trying to sound each other out. It did not take long for us to forget our uneasiness, and Duff started to be more forthcoming. His remarks reminded me of the quick but painful punches that a boxer delivers to the enemy. There were lots of them. I was also struck by his ability to think on his feet and to remain in control when the unexpected happened. For instance, at some point during the interview Duff referred to criticisms of his use of language in *Once Were Warriors*. He was in mid-sentence when a picture of a seafaring canoe that was strategically placed above him fell off the wall, barely missing his head. Duff saw the humor in this incident and laughed, saying "Stranger things have happened to me."

What follows is an edited version of the interview, which was videotaped and recorded on audio cassette.

VH What made you write your first novel, *Once Were Warriors*?

AD I always wanted to be a writer. I mean what makes a writer write? What makes a runner run? You get out there and you run and you don't analyze it or question it.

VH What made you move into writing fiction?

AD I had no formal training, other than what I read myself and taught myself. I'd gone through the range of several institutions, you know, in growing up. Fiction was my only possible outlet.

VH How did you learn how to write a novel? Through trial and error?

AD Yes, years and years of sitting at the typewriter and writing rubbish, and then finally it starts to get a bit better and you feel instinctively that you can write.

VH Do you have an outline before you write or do you just begin with an image, an idea, and then see how that takes you?

AD I hear a voice, really. Or I get the beginning of a sentence, like "Coming down that road," that sort of thing. And then immediately I have the road in my mind. I'm very visual and very emotional. So I try and combine the two. And music plays a very big part in my writing, as an external influence. I try to recreate it in literary terms as well.

VH *Once Were Warriors* seems to have taken on a very political tone, judging by the way it's been interpreted by the critics and a lot of Maori people. When you were writing it, were you aware that it was going to set off a controversy?

AD I wasn't aware of that at all because in *Once Were Warriors* I exalted Maori culture. I knew the book would upset some of the politically correct brigade because they had different reasons for our high crime rate, and everything else. Having been there and done that myself, I knew they were just telling absolute lies or else they were just spouting theories that were completely irrelevant to the real situation. So I knew that some of them would be upset.

My own Maori people from my tribal group love the book. When we had the premiere of the movie a few weeks ago, they traveled all the way from my home town, a four-hour drive . . . all my elders, all my *kupuna* to bless their boy. So I have always been very strong with my people. I am a strong supporter of Maori culture, but I have also questioned certain aspects of my culture. A healthy culture should subject itself to questions. My questioning upset a lot of people because we had one of those rigid cultures that did not allow questions, and I came along and said things like Why can't women be chiefs? Why can't women have equal right of say? My tribe in particular is very strong on that. They don't believe that a woman has a right to own what they call a *paepae*, a seat of power.

And we also have another system which privileges the eldest son of the eldest son and the line goes down. I say we're limiting ourselves, because often a leader will appear who might be the sixth eldest and it might be a woman. This natural leader might be lost to the people because we have this stupid tradition.

VH With that sort of perspective I'm sure the feminists would back you.

AD I've never had any feminists come out against me. That's rather telling actually. It's because I wrote *Once Were Warriors* through the eyes of a woman. The other sympathetic character is Grace, the teenage daughter. And I strongly believe that we've got to be equal partners. There's absolutely no question about that.

VH In your nonfiction book, *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge*, I didn't get the impression that you were supportive of the feminists or political activists.

AD No. No. Look, I'm not keen on anybody who gets themselves into all kinds of groups who hold up banners and say "This is what we believe in!" I'm an atheist. I'm mistrustful of anybody who comes along and says to me "You have to believe in this because all of us here have said that you've got to believe it!" To hell with it. I'll make up my own mind what I believe in; if I don't, so be it.

VH Some Maori people I talked to say that you shouldn't have hung the dirty linen out in public, that you should have gone to the *marae* where you could see the Maori people and tell them what you think, and it could be discussed within the group. By writing fiction that sells internationally, you were playing into the hands of white New Zealanders.

AD That's utter nonsense. One, there are thousands of *marae* so I couldn't have physically gone to thousands of them. Two, my medium is writing, and three, writing is not a preferred medium for Maori people. We are not a race of reading people. Most of us don't even read newspapers.

Anyway, it is also my dirty washing. And I think it's arrogance to say: "How dare you stand up and say this!" Well I'm saying, "I've just stood up and said it, what are you going to do about it?" My critics are so used to everybody falling into line. They're used to being able to bully people. And I'm saying "I'm a warrior, too!" I got brought up as a warrior and I don't remember a warrior ever allowing himself to be bullied.

VH Could you talk for a while then about this warrior image? What is its relation to your first novel and to Maori history?

AD We were a nation of warriors. War was our culture. That's how we evolved. We probably originated from here, Hawai'i. But I don't know

what the situation was like here, we weren't taught that in our schools. But certainly when the whites arrived in New Zealand, we were a tribal people who did not call ourselves Maori. This is not what is being bandied about by the academics and the political activists, of course.

Each tribe was unto itself and for itself and we warred against each other. We had developed warriorhood to a significant degree. There was a certain warrior pride. Today, most of that is totally misplaced. We have gang members covering themselves in tattoos and thinking that it's okay to go and beat up a woman, then gang-rape her. Or they think it's okay to spend every single penny they've got on booze and crash head on into families while traveling on the roads.

A warrior doesn't go and fight somebody smaller than himself. A true warrior would never hit a woman. But that's what we have done, what we have been doing for too long. So I'm saying get back that warrior ethic, but channel it.

VH So you think this warrior image could be transformed in the present-day context to a more positive image? For instance, a warrior needs to be disciplined. That particular aspect could be very relevant in the present-day context. If channeled positively, this image could be used for the benefit of the Maori people today. Is this the sort of thing you're getting at?

AD Yes. But of course discipline is one of the many things that we're lacking, and it's certainly not coming from our leaders. So I'm telling our leaders, you'd better start talking discipline and education and reading. Instead of going to the pub to drink beer with your fifty dollars, why not say I'm staying home and I'm going to take my child and buy fifty dollars' worth of books, or take my wife out to dinner, or buy some flowers. Or let's go for a walk in the park or go sailing. There are lots of things to do.

I'm dealing with Maori kids that live eight miles from the beach yet have never been there. I'm paying for the buses to take them to the beach, 'cause their parents are all smoking cigarettes and it costs six dollars a day for a packet of cigarettes. Their parents are all boozing up. They start boozing on a Thursday night; it doesn't finish till Sunday, and half the time it ends in an all-out brawl. And I'm saying why haven't we pointed this out? And as for these idiots telling me "Don't hang out our dirty washing," if I waited for them to hang out our dirty washing, it would never get hung out, and the washing would get dirtier.

VH Some people's criticism of that perspective is that racism is institutionalized in the Pakeha-dominated government. That is why Maori people, like any colonized people, break out in drunkenness, brawls, or end up in prison. How do you counter that view?

AD Racism is far less institutionalized in New Zealand than in any other country in the world. That's why we Maori have made the most advancement for all our claims. That's why the Treaty of Waitangi has been enshrined now in our legislation by the highest court in the land, by the Appeal Court, which says this is a binding contract. Now we're able to do all sorts of things like that. You couldn't get that from an entrenched racist people. We have always played alongside each other in sport. We have fought alongside each other. We have lived life together as New Zealand citizens.

In the last fifteen years, there has been a divide there. Some of it has been good because it has raised the consciousness of everybody, in particular certain whites, the smug element, or the ones that didn't want to know. So, I'm not dismissing everything that some of these political activists do. On the other hand, it has turned us into a race of people that says it's okay to be a loser, it's okay to beat my wife, it's okay to go and get drunk three or four times a week with the last of my money instead of paying someone to look after my kids, because the whites have colonized me and dispirited me.

Well, you know the answer to that? The answer is to respect yourself, to say, well, I'm not going to have a beer. I'm going to take my children somewhere. I'm going to stop hitting my wife. I'm going to stop blaming the world for my problems. I know it's harder for me to get a job, so I've got to try twice as hard. Don't cry about it. Someone's got to be the minority.

And as for racism, we're all racists. Maoris are racist against Samoans; Samoans hate Tongans; Tongans hate Samoans. Blacks hate blacks in Africa. They're slaughtering each other. It's tribe against tribe, black on black. Same in New Zealand. We're all racist, every human being on earth. Maori against Maori. No one says anything about that because you can't label it conveniently.

VH In your novel *Once Were Warriors* you seem to provide a way out of the very difficult situation that you have just described. Are you saying that people like Beth, Jake's wife, will have to show the way?

AD Yes, I think we need the Beths to show the way. The Jakes are never going to show the way. I have said in my book, *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge*, that women will lead the way because they care about the kids. I've never seen a group of women fighting in a bar with a beer or talking about who they hit yesterday and how big their muscles are. Women are saying, "Oh my little Johnny came home yesterday and he, oh I couldn't believe it, he can spell the word 'everything'!" You know, things like that. This never occurs to those idiot males. The movie version of my novel is slightly idealized, although I'm very happy with the movie. And the person who took over writing the screenplay is a self-described politically correct person who thinks I'm very radical, for some odd reason.

She seems to think that our culture and only our culture will save us. I don't believe that. Culture by itself is not enough. I went to a prison two days ago and talked to a group of guys in there and by the time I finished with them, they said "Oh we'd like you to come again, Mr Duff." Because I'm relevant to them. And I said "What's wrong? If I was able to give you the secret now, what is it? Is it culture? Is it your language?" And they said, "No man, just how to pay the bloody rent."

That's what they want. They want to be functioning citizens. And these people are saying, "We'll teach you how to do bone carving," or "We'll teach you how to do flax weaving," but these things don't pay the rent. When the landlord comes along and says "Where's my rent?" you can't say "Oh but I've been on this course and, you know, I don't have my rent." You can't do that.

VH Some people seem to think you believe culture has no place in present-day society. But I don't get that impression. I seem to hear you saying that if it would help pay the rent, fine. But don't go all out for culture when you don't have the money to pay the rent. Is that what you're saying?

AD Very much so.

VH Where's the place of culture and tradition in contemporary society then?

AD My staunchest supporters are the Maori Arts and Crafts Institute in Rotorua. All my books are compulsory study there. The tutors are my relations. They are the ones who launched *Once Were Warriors* at the premiere of the film.

That's why I laugh at my critics, because it has never occurred to them that I might have backing. I'm probably guilty of playing with them a little bit because I find them rather lightweight. I need about twenty of them to make it a battle for me. That's why they all need the collective of each other. As individuals, not one is capable of stepping out and saying "I'll go toe to toe with Alan Duff."

VH Were you surprised by the responses to *Once Were Warriors* then? Did that influence your writing of your next novel, *One Night Out Stealing*?

AD Yes it did influence me, but it influenced me so much that my publisher objected to the version that I handed him. He said "You've got two thieves here, and they don't swear and they don't actually do anything." I said, "Everybody's been criticizing me for the swearing."

VH In *One Night Out Stealing*, you have a Pakeha character, so I'm wondering whether the criticism was less than what you got after *Once Were Warriors*, which is predominantly about Maori. Did your critics say, "Oh, so the Pakeha people can be bad, too. Well, maybe Duff's coming around to this idea."

AD No, they took the opposite view! They're so monumentally stupid, these people who call me a Maori basher. When they're so hyped up about my agenda they read between the lines when it isn't there. *One Night Out Stealing* is a little crack at my critics. "So what are you going to call me now? White basher?" My main point is to say that it's a universal human condition. You know, if you're an asshole, it don't matter what color you are, as simple as that. In fact, I think my second book is a superior work in terms of technical skill and everything else.

VH I agree. But I think that when you were working within the fiction mode, many people weren't quite sure how to interpret what exactly you were saying in relation to race relations in New Zealand. But then you came out with *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge*. Would you say that this was when you had your greatest outcry from the Maori community?

AD I certainly had an outcry. But I look at the people who are behind the outcry and then I know why the outcry. I find that people who are of tiny and mediocre stature are grossly dishonest. They can never ever admit anything. If you say, "Look I have a red and blue shirt," they'll

look for lighting, they'll be peering behind the bookshelves looking for some sort of trick. So I was heavily criticized in some circles, yes.

In key areas of Maori education, my book *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge* is compulsory study. Sir John Bennett and I had a cash incentive scheme to help encourage Maori parents to get their kids to do their homework, because we're still failing education. So that's been adopted. It was Sir John Bennett who went against the political grain to say, "I know what he's saying and I'm backing him."

John March, the director of the Arts and Crafts Institute in Rotorua for the Maori Arts and Crafts School, said the same. He said, "For my tutors this will be compulsory study. This is what is wrong with Maori." Admittedly, I got a bit personal in the book. I named names and I have my moments of regret. There are certain traumas there that I don't deny, because I was so upset. At that stage I was certainly playing a lone battle, and it just seemed that I was against the whole world. But I knew I was right because what I was advocating was not a personal thing. It was simply saying, "Let's get an education. Don't throw the culture out the window. Let them go hand in hand but you know, education will see you in good stead and culture simply won't on its own." The most cultured Maori in New Zealand can't get jobs. They're on the unemployment. I know, I've got cousins and uncles that are on unemployment benefits. They know their culture backwards and yet they're not functioning members of society. They're part of a collective, so they're all pulled in, and that's how they live, and that's no good.

VH What has been the response of the well-established writers? It must have been a shock to many to have a newcomer all of a sudden break through all the barriers and come up with a bestseller and a movie.

AD I wouldn't find it difficult to take if somebody else rose up like that. I'll be in full praise of them. I don't know how they feel.

VH So these writers do not engage in this controversy? They have not written to the papers to declare where they stand?

AD No. Not one Maori writer has written to the papers about how they feel. I don't know. I hardly mix with other writers. Except for all my friends. My friends are self-employed, they're business people, they're different. They're driven like me and they've got tons of energy and they want to get out and organize the world or fix it or achieve something.

And those are my friends. I'm not sort of into sitting around quietly puffing on a pipe in my tweed jacket.

VH Have there been any responses that you found useful to you as a writer in terms of your next book, your next work of fiction, whatever. I'm thinking about the critics, now. Has there been any meaningful, useful criticism of your work?

AD Well, one woman called me a genius. That was rather nice for two hours. And then I had a look at my bookshelf at some real geniuses and I realized, well I think she made a mistake here! Critics don't influence me in any way whatsoever. They don't affect my existence. I mean I've just written a letter to the New Zealand books journal, for instance, 'cause one critic has come out saying, "Look, I think we've missed what Duff's been doing. I think we've missed his narrative shifts and his literary devices and what he does." And he ended by saying "I think we should give him a chance." But I just wrote him a letter saying "I don't want your chance. I never aspire to be in your club." I don't. I do not give one stuff what they think of me.

VH So would you say, then, that what is important for you is that you say what you want to say honestly and in the most interesting way possible?

AD Yes.

VH You don't have an audience in mind out there and you don't try to please your audience? You just say what you think needs saying.

AD No, I have a great respect for the reader. For instance, on the plane coming last night, I opened up a page of Anthony Burgess and it was just self-indulgent, trying to show off how clever he was, in my humble opinion. I like to make my stories move fast. It's like telling a story, a little dinner-table story. You don't say, "Oh yeah well the sun was up; it was at 11:20, you know, and 27 seconds. And the sun was out but there was just a little cloud." You get on and you move the story, don't you? And that's what it's about. But I still think I go deeper than any of my critics, you know.

VH Do you prefer that people call you a Maori writer or just a writer with no Maori agenda in mind?

AD I don't like the Maori agenda. I don't mind being called a writer who is a Maori but I'm no Maori writer. I'm a very proud Maori but I'm no Maori writer.

VH So you think then that writers don't have to carry the burden of responsibility for their people?

AD I have a sense of responsibility, but I most emphatically believe that it is not the writer's responsibility. I happen to have made it. Well, either made it or it's been thrust upon me, or whatever way you look at it. I am also confident that I'll probably do more for my people than any other Maori in a long time, not least that I have got the debate raging. I have stood up to all the criticism. I've been out to the *marae*. I have said to the elders, "Yeah I'm the guy that you saw on the TV that said "Stop the *kaumatua*!" Well I'm here in the flesh saying again, "Stop the *kaumatua*! If you can't lead, get off the stage." And they applauded me. I'm very confident in what I've done and in what I'm doing. Right now I'm heavily involved in trying to raise a large sum of money for education scholarships. I guess my high profile opens doors that wouldn't normally give. But I can't get the bureaucratic government doors open. I think they're afraid in case they appear to be associated with me.

I'm pretty confident that in the next ten years I can get books into the homes of every Maori child in the country, where they've got none at present. And I don't mean, again I emphasize, I don't mean all, but the great majority of Maori homes do not have books.

VH You've just come out with a collection of stories titled *State Ward*. Is that right?

AD No, not a collection of stories. It was originally a radio series, produced to pay my daughter's school fees. She's in a private school and not being one who runs to the government to say "Well, I'm in the shit here, you know, give me some money," I wrote a radio series and got the money to pay her school fees. And it turned into a bestseller. It was number one on the bestseller list from when it came out in February. Yes, it got pushed into number two recently by *Once Were Warriors*, which came surging back again.

VH After the movie?

AD After the movie, yes. I'm working on movies now. I've signed a couple of movie contracts. I'd like to do screenplays.

VH For which?

AD Somebody else's story and then another original idea of mine, a thriller set in London with an international cast. And I think we're going to make a big budget movie out of that.

VH What do you think of the cultural renaissance that's happening in New Zealand now? Are there other people like yourself who are taking a very individual approach to their work, or do you see it as largely a collection of artists or writers with a strong political agenda working hand in hand with the struggle for self-determination?

AD The fact that they call it a renaissance is a complete abuse of a real renaissance, because a renaissance is actually a celebration or a bursting out of not just cultural things. It is intellectual, it is tolerance, it is open-mindedness, and it is philosophical. It is the gathering of ideas, whereas our so-called renaissance is so intolerant. So fundamentalist. They can't find a place for me, for instance. Now if I'm not part of a renaissance then something's gone wrong somewhere. You can't just say "We're leaving behind the most syndicated newspaper columnist in the country." I'm it really, as far as achievements go. They want to go back to the old ways where you listened to the chief, and the elders were always right, and women were not equals, and we didn't read. We all sat around and smiled at each other and did all these gooey, gooey things that I find quite offensive and repulsive.

I don't want to sit around with you and say, "Hey let's celebrate being brown." I want to sit around with you and say "Let's celebrate being friends. . . ." I want to sit around with you and say "Let's celebrate the idea that you can be of that political belief and we've got eight people at our dinner table who have different political beliefs, but we're having a bloody good time." I do not want to sit at a table of people who all think like me and act like me and talk like me and squawk like me. There's no dynamics in that type of situation, no energy.

VH Does it surprise you that your two novels could be taken so literally by the general public, many of whom think it is reality you're writing about?

AD It doesn't surprise me, it staggers me in a way. It appalls me that we have university professors on very high salaries pontificating from their

ivory towers, talking about the situation according to their six hundred ninety-five books of theory.

I have seen the kind of people I write about in prison. I have seen them in the streets. I have seen them in the boxing gyms. I have seen them in various places. But you've got to get down there and say, "Well, I'm one of you, but, you know, I ain't here to pay your bills. I ain't here to say 'If you've got a hangover that's alright, just have another couple hours of sleep.' I'm here to say, 'Maybe you've got to reduce the number of hangovers'." That's what I'm saying. And I'm not there to say "You only have hangovers because of the white man," that "It's white man's drink and therefore it's not your fault." As I say, I've never seen a Maori being led into a bar in handcuffs, but I've seen heaps of them coming out in handcuffs, under arrest for breaking up the joint. Because they turn into supermen once they've drunk ten jugs of beer. What do professors know about people like this, who have never had more than a hundred fifty dollars a week in their hand?

VH Your own personal experiences give your work a lot of credibility. You're saying that people who don't really know what they're talking about because they don't have your kind of experience shouldn't be commenting on your novels. And yet they do. Why, do you think?

AD 'Cause they're so thick-skinned. They have this intellectual vanity that sets off little bells in their heads, and they think it's the colonization process that has done all this. They've got this little graph and they can map it all out and it fits neatly into their whole methodology of learning. And then they come out spouting. They keep forgetting to go and talk to the Jube McCalls and the Sonny Mahias, and to ask them how they feel. "What's up mate? Why are you crying?" You've got to go to a guy at two o'clock in the morning and say "Why are you crying?" You don't go to him at six o'clock at night, when he's just walked into the pub and he's covering up and he's leaning on the bar and he's trying to look tough because everybody's there.

VH You're talking about the second novel?

AD *One Night Out Stealing*, yeah.

VH It seems ironic that academics talk a lot about how wonderful it is to preserve culture and do the dances and so on, and yet many of them don't do it. It seems okay for others to do it, but not them.

AD That's right.

VH Do you think it's because deep down they realize that's not where the real money comes from?

AD Well, you notice that they themselves don't resign from their academic positions because of a big salary and lifetime tenure. They say pat, pat, pat on the head. Good people. That's the way to do it. Good on you. But they stay in their secure positions. It's like what I said about Dr Ranginui Walker. I said it's astonishing that you're getting paid a hundred thousand dollars by whites or by the white democratic system to throw brickbats at white society. They're paying you a salary. They're celebrating democracy and freedom of speech and they're paying you a salary. Now would you go to a Maori tribe and say, "Let's get a white guy in here. We'll pay him a hundred thousand dollars a year salary and let him throw brickbats at our Maori society"? No way, you know. The criticism never cuts both ways. But I've actually got quite a few mates there in the university. By and large, I don't have many friends there, I guess.

Recently I became a polytechnic tutor. Someone said on national radio recently that perhaps Alan Duff could sit in on a discussion about Maori mental health. This person was immediately ostracized for daring to suggest that I should be anywhere near. Somebody else who tutors has just been paid off sixty thousand dollars because he didn't agree with what they were doing. They just said "Here's sixty thousand dollars. Go find another job." It's not only dishonesty, it's theft of the taxpayers' money.

I was in some of the universities in America a couple of years ago, and I heard about deconstruction theories, and the fact that civilization started with black people, and all this sort of thing. And they said, "Christopher Columbus was actually a terrible person." All you're doing here is replacing bias with bias. I think you should say instead, "Okay I think that the history that everyone was taught was biased in favor of the majority. Let's try and do something about it." But you don't go completely mad and go and replace it with another one, do you? It's like replacing one dictator with another.

VH Do you think your mixed parentage gives you a special vantage point from which to observe what's happening within your society and without?

AD Being of two races gives me a magnificent advantage. I don't deny it. It's wonderful. I can switch when I'm with my own people and my accent

changes when I'm with others, even though we're still speaking about the same thing.

VH So you don't deny the fact that you're mixed, part Pakeha, part Maori, unlike some people who play down that other side that they know isn't going to be of benefit to them in the present climate.

AD I think of myself as Maori. I always have. But I owe so much to other writers, invariably white, who have gone before me. You know, the William Faulkners and the Steinbecks. Without them I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you now. So I'd be a fool to deny their influence.

I like classical music. I love newspapers. We arrived last night, and while my wife was standing on the balcony, I'm in there with the *Wall Street Journal* in our hotel room. I love the whole world of newspapers and everything. So I don't run around doing any of that sort of nonsense you referred to. I find that silly. And the older I get the more silly I find it.

VH Why do you say it's silly?

AD Because some people think if you don't wear a big bone carving around your neck you can't possibly be a Maori. I'd rather get a thousand books into Maori homes in the middle of the ghetto.

VH You keep coming back to the importance of reading. Can you talk about that influence in your early life?

AD My father was white and educated, but unfortunately my parents split up. Reading was absolutely essential for my father. The idea that you could function in the world without being exposed to a variety of literature was incomprehensible to my father. My father had a very big influence on me. He used to point out in a very quiet way, "This is why," you know. If you've got people who've never exposed themselves to the written word and most of the debate is taking place within the written medium, then you've got totally uninformed persons. All these persons have is an opinion.

I saw something on television the other day. A woman was singled out by these people who do not read. Everything for them goes on hearsay and rumor. And they said the bag she was carrying had their children's body parts. And then this madness. The crowd built up and built up. They were inside with the police, nine cops were looking after her. They were literally breaking the walls down. They wanted to lynch her. Now,

people who read would never behave like that, because somebody would say "Hold on a minute, where is the evidence? Where's the blood on her hands?" The shot ended with this woman lying on the ground, her brain splattered. She had just been clubbed, smashed to ribbons.

I said to my wife, "That's a consequence of a nonreading culture." I have been subjected to that "Let's lynch him" sort of rule. I've been in positions where I say, "You guys think I'm a Maori basher?" and they go, "Yeah." So then I say, "How many of you have read what I've written?" Not one has read what I've written, but they're still upset with me. Why? Because they heard it. They heard that I was something terrible. What utter appalling ignorance! I don't want my people to be like that. We don't have to be like that!

VH A criticism of your work, which you've probably heard before, is that you are saying that Maori or colonized people should assimilate into white society. Do you think Pakeha society should do likewise and accept some of the Maori ways of thinking and doing things that may be different? Are there things in Pakeha society that you think are not positive and therefore its members should learn from the Maori people?

AD Well yes. I think we handle our funerals better. And we're not obsessive with motorcars. Look at the way they treat their cars. It's a wonder they don't fuck them, you know. They love them that much. And I hate that. I never clean my cars. I've got two new cars but I don't clean them. The whole idea that you should worship a car! I don't care if it's got scratches all over it.

There are things that we can teach the Pakeha. But I have never ever said assimilate to a Pakeha! It's not a Pakeha world. It's a universal world. In fact, it's Asian now. The Asians are having the biggest effect on our economy. I mean Britain used to take 66 percent of our gross national product. Now they take 6 percent. Britain is finished, washed up. The Asians are taking everything. And you know something? The Asians have got the work ethic and they value education and they're coming to our schools now and they're coming top of the class. They're succeeding. And the Maoris are going further and further down. So I think we've got to adapt to a universal world that is getting more and more modern. And I'm saying to the Maori, "We've got to find our place. We've got to start working on it right now, and to hell with the damn culture. If the Asian child has got computer skills and can work fourteen hours a day, then

why is it we have cultural things where we sit around and we gorge ourselves and we get big and fat and a fourteen-hour day kills us? We won't have a culture to celebrate any more will we? If Asians are going to completely overrun us because we can't match it with them, then the culture won't mean a damn thing." I've always said get economically strong, and the culture will get strong with it. I don't want us to be totally materialistic. But it's very nice staying at the Hilton Hotel here, for instance. I don't want us to worship material things, and I think we can teach white people that. We can teach white people how to be more relaxed and to be a bit more lively. But then whites can teach us conversation and social skills, so that you don't have to sit with a group of Maoris for an hour and no one says anything because they're not taught how to carry on a decent conversation, and how to handle themselves socially.